

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Ellsberg recalls his side of Pentagon Papers revelations

This story was published in A&E on Sunday, October 13, 2002.

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Special To The Post-Dispatch

"Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers"

By Daniel Ellsberg

Published by Viking, 498 pages, \$29.95

In 1971, an obscure bureaucrat became the most highly publicized whistle-blower in U.S. history. His name: Daniel Ellsberg. His pedigree: private schools in Detroit, Harvard University, service in the Marine Corps, RAND Corp. foreign policy think tank, Defense Department adviser assigned to the Pentagon, expert on the Vietnam War. His deed: Copying a top-secret 7,000-page document delineating the real story behind United States involvement in the Vietnam War, then disseminating it to journalists at The New York Times and other publications, including the Post-Dispatch.

Ellsberg, who understood from first-hand observations in Southeast Asia that the U.S. military could never succeed in helping the South Vietnamese win the war against the North Vietnamese, wanted to halt the death toll. He wanted President Richard M. Nixon to withdraw U.S. troops and civilian advisers. He wanted those responsible for the U.S. buildup in Vietnam during the administrations of Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Nixon to tell the world about the lies disseminated to justify the deadly intervention.

Knowing that if caught disseminating the Pentagon Papers he could serve a long prison term, Ellsberg informed his former wife that he might be unable to support their two adolescent children. He asked his current wife, who held antiwar views, whether she could still love him as an inmate. He separated himself from his RAND Corp. job so the think tank would be scarred by association as little as possible. Then Ellsberg gathered the gigantic document he had been covertly copying for two years and shared it with those who might help make a difference.

Assuming Ellsberg has accurate recall and has omitted little of importance -- dicey assumptions in the normally self-aggrandizing memoir genre -- his book is a classic. As he explains at length the factors driving him to become a whistle-blower, he shares his doubts and his missteps. No previous psychological portrait of a whistle-blower has topped Ellsberg's for suspense, subtlety and clarity.

The admirable qualities of the book extend beyond its insights into one person's evolution from organization man to dissident. Ellsberg surmises why so many of his colleagues and superiors refused to publicly denounce a war they privately called immoral and unnecessarily destructive. Ellsberg explains why the general populace accepts government secrecy even when it runs counter to their well-being. Ellsberg shows with example after example how those conducting the war succeeded in lying to journalists, who then broadcast those lies to millions.

Ellsberg's trial for leaking the Pentagon Papers serves as a primer on the judicial system, explaining how those in power do not hesitate to commit prosecutorial misconduct. After months of suspense about the trial's outcome, Ellsberg sees justice prevail in his own case. (The charges were dismissed in 1973 after it was discovered that Nixon had authorized White House aides to burglarize the office

of Ellsberg's psychiatrist in an attempt to discredit him.) But he knows that most defendants in noble causes cannot afford a legal dream team such as his.

Previous books have explained the Southeast Asia wars as well as this one, perhaps most notably "A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam" by Neil Sheehan. (Not so incidentally, Sheehan and Vann number among the heroes in Ellsberg's memoir.) Earlier books have also explained the legal battles spawned by Ellsberg clearly and compellingly, including "The Day the Presses Stopped: A History of the Pentagon Papers Case" by David Rudenstine.

But none of the previous books, however admirable, include a full account of Ellsberg's psychology. None of those books brings together all the telling scenes witnessed by Ellsberg that leave no doubt about the mixture of lies, heartlessness and buffoonery of players such as Nixon, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.

Last year, Tom Wells wrote "Wild Man: The Life and Times of Daniel Ellsberg." That 650-page book gave Ellsberg his due as a whistle-blower, but primarily trashed him as a sex maniac with an outsized ego and a motor mouth. Ellsberg, who cooperated with Wells during the early research, eventually withdrew his cooperation.

Perhaps Ellsberg is something like the despicable human being portrayed by Wells. Perhaps not. Judging by "Secrets," whatever he is or is not, Ellsberg is a keen observer of public policy. The citizenry he tried to serve by leaking the Pentagon Papers 31 years ago is fortunate to have access to his wisdom.

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Published in the A&E section of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on Sunday, October 13, 2002.
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